

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
December 2, 2001
First Sunday of Advent

“Ready or Not”
Matthew 24:36-44

What if Christmas were tomorrow? Would you be ready?

What if by some strange agreement,
all the churches, the businesses, the stores, and the government decided that, instead of
December 25th, Christmas would be held on December 3rd,
would you be ready?

Many of you would still need to get your tree.
There are most likely a good many gifts you still have to buy,
a few relatives you haven't figured out what in the world to get this year.
You still haven't finished writing all those little notes in your Christmas cards
and, if you're like us, you still have some addresses to track down.
Decorations are still half in boxes, half out – or maybe still in the basement.
You've pulled out your favorite cookie recipes, but still need get to the store
to get the ingredients.

I suspect that if suddenly we realized that Christmas would be tomorrow,
and we'd have to celebrate it, *ready or not*, or miss it altogether,
we probably begin to re-evaluate what is really important about the day.

What can we do without?

What do we absolutely have to have, and do, for it to be Christmas?
Have the family together? Go to church and sing Christmas carols?
Light a candle, and eat a meal? Get out the nativity scene and set it up?
Read the Christmas story from Luke?

But for most of us I suspect it would be hard to get into the spirit of Christmas
without the buildup and anticipation that normally comes before.

It takes a lot to get ready for Christmas.

But that's just how it will be, says Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew,
when the Son of Man comes.
*But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven,
nor the Son, but only the Father...*

So Jesus says,
*Keep awake...for (like Christmas coming a month early)
you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*

Matthew paints some scary pictures of that day.

It will be as in the days of Noah
people eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage
then come the waters, unexpectedly, and the floods sweep them all away.

It will be as a thief who comes in the night,
while the owner of the house is asleep,
noise across the floor downstairs, the sound of breaking glass, a rustling,
the thief is gone, the owner is left with nothing.

It will be like the phone ringing late at night, bringing unexpected news.
Or like the man working at his desk, thinking about his plans,
suddenly he grabs his chest, gasps, and slumps over on top of his
unfinished work.

Or like a clear blue September morning,
when suddenly out of the sky comes terror, like a flash of lightning.

And then Matthew gives us this strange description of two working side by side
2 standing at the copy machine, one is taken, one is left;
2 standing in line at the grocery store, one is taken, one is left.
Not everyone will be ready
for the coming of the Son of Man.

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When Jesus talks about the Son of Man coming,
he's talking about God's Messiah
who will come as the judge of all the earth.

Just after today's passage, Jesus begins to tell parables
about the coming judgment...

He tells of a master returning to his household after a long journey
and finding that the servant he left in charge
has been mistreating the other servants.
The master puts the unfaithful servant out of his house,
cuts him off from his livelihood, puts him with the hypocrites,
where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Another parable is about 10 bridesmaids,
5 of them wise, who were ready for the wedding banquet,
with their lamps filled with oil, trimmed and burning;
5 of them foolish, who were not ready,
having no oil for their lamps.
When the groom comes, the 5 who were not ready are
shut out of the wedding banquet.

And Jesus tells about the day of judgement,
when the Son of Man will separate the sheep and the goats,
welcoming the sheep into the glory of the kingdom of God,
but cursing the goats and casting them into the eternal fire
prepared for the devil and his angels.
And the difference between the sheep and the goats,
the sheep showed mercy to the least of these...

giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty,
clothes to the naked, hospitality to the stranger,
care for the sick, compassion for the prisoner.
the goats showed no mercy,
never going out of their way to help
too busy shopping for Christmas, probably.

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So, welcome to the season of Advent, when we begin at the end,
when we remember Christ's first coming,
by looking forward his second coming,
which will not be so pleasant, so peaceful, so silent,
and where much will depend on our earthly track record
in showing mercy
and in caring for those God has entrusted to us.

Let me be honest: I don't know how literally to take these images –
they are after all, parables.

In fact, I'd say no one knows, except Jesus' Father in heaven.

So, regardless of how literally we take them,

we'd be fools not to take these warnings very seriously.

What they tell us – in this season of waiting and expectation –

is that in order to be ready for the coming of Christ

and to properly celebrate his first coming in Bethlehem,

we had better be living lives of mercy and compassion

lives that reflect the mercy and compassion of Jesus.

To be ready for the coming of Christ means to realize

that what we do with our lives matters to God –

it matters terribly much to God.

But once we start down that road of trying to please God with our lives,

we will not travel very far before we realize that we're bound to fall short

we're bound to miss the kingdom's goal,

we're likely to be asleep, or unprepared, or misbehaving

at just the wrong time, in just the wrong place.

If being ready for Christ's coming means

living lives of moral uprightness like Jesus,

then we will never really be ready.

Reinhold Neibuhr once said that

“the business of true religion is to destroy man's moral conceit...”

But much of modern religion is just sentimentality that has

“tended to increase, rather than diminish, moral conceit.”

But “a truly religious man ought to distinguish himself

...by recognizing that he is not moral, that he remains a sinner

to the end.

“A sense of sin,” says Neibuhr,

“is more central to religion than is any other attitude.”

Now while that might not be a popular notion these days –
that is, nurturing a sense of our own sinfulness –
I think it is exactly what Jesus was getting at.
Rediscovering the bottomless pit of our own sinful nature
is exactly what we need to do in order to be ready
for the coming of Christ.

When we stop seeing the black hole that sin is eating in our lives
when we lose awareness of our own moral failure
then we forget why we need Christ in the first place,
and Christmas degenerates into nothing more than
a frenzied shopping season tangled up in gobs of electrified light
in which we buy into the lie that we can make Christmas happen
if we purchase the right gifts
put up enough decorations
and act extra nice to each other for about a month.

It is perhaps only when we are aware of the depth of our own sin,
that we are truly prepared to stand back in awesome joy
at the wonder-filling,
sin-shattering
peace-making
event of Christmas day,
and event that is utterly beyond our doing.

That is why the world needs the church more than ever
to tell our story about the child of Christmas,
who will come again to finish what he has begun.